Masthead Logo

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The Palimpsest

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THE PURPOSE OF THIS MAGAZINE

THE PALIMPSEST, issued monthly by the State Historical Society of Iowa, is devoted to the dissemination of Iowa History. Supplementing the other publications of this Society, it aims to present the materials of Iowa History in a form that is attractive and a style that is popular in the best sense—to the end that the story of our Commonwealth may be more widely read and cherished.

BENJ. F. SHAMBAUGH
Superintendent

THE MEANING OF PALIMPSESTS

In early times palimpsests were parchments or other materials from which one or more writings had been erased to give room for later records. But the erasures were not always complete; and so it became the fascinating task of scholars not only to translate the later records but also to reconstruct the original writings by deciphering the dim fragments of letters partly erased and partly covered by subsequent texts.

The history of Iowa may be likened to a palimpsest which holds the records of successive generations. To decipher these records of the past, reconstruct them, and tell the stories which they contain is the task of those who write history.

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THE PALIMPSEST

EDITED BY JOHN ELY BRIGGS

VOL. XII ISSUED IN DECEMBER 1931 NO. 12

A Pioneer Home

A one-room house, built of logs with the bark on, roofed with clapboards — this is really the first home I can remember, and since it was my home for several years it is as fresh in my memory as though I had seen it but yesterday.

At first there were stumps near the house and very large, tall hazel bushes. The house had two windows with twelve "lights" or panes of glass in each. This glass was so defective that objects seen through it were much distorted: one person might appear as two, or perhaps twice as broad or tall as in reality. The one door, which was on the south side, was made of upright boards held together by "cleats" or cross pieces. It was called a "battened door". The door, window frames, and floor were the only parts of the house that were made of sawed lumber, and no nails were used except in the windows and door.

The logs had been chopped with an ax in proper

lengths for the sides and ends, and a notch cut near each end. These notches held the logs in place at the corners of the cabin. The wide cracks between the logs were filled with "chinks" or pieces of wood hewed out and driven in so as to fill the crack as tightly as possible. When the cabin had been completely "chinked", a batch of mortar was made by mixing clay with sufficient water to produce the right consistency. This clay mud was taken up by handfuls, thrown with force into the cracks, and afterward smoothed over with a piece of wood used as a trowel.

In making the roof, small logs were used for rafters and fastened in place with wooden "pins". Clapboards, about three feet long and six inches in width, were split from logs and laid on the rafters in courses as shingles are now. These clapboards were held in place by poles laid over them, parallel to the rafters beneath, and fastened at the ends with wooden pins.

Our door had iron hinges, though in many early homes the doors were hung with wooden hinges. I distinctly remember that our door fastened with a wooden latch on the inside, to which a leather string was fastened and passed through a small hole cut in the door. When the family was inside and wished to keep intruders out, the "latchstring" was pulled in, leaving no way of "raising the latch" from the outside. In those primitive times it was common to wel-

come a friend by saying "the latchstring is always out to you."

Several years later father built "the new log house" which had a shingle roof and doors with locks and hinges. This was a larger house, built of hewed logs and with the cracks filled with lime mortar. There was an "upstairs", reached by a ladder for a stairway. Altogether this was considered a very comfortable home.

The cellar was like all cellars in that part of the country at that time — a hole dug in the solid ground with no walls except the smooth, hard earth. A trap door in the floor and a ladder furnished the means of getting up and down. This ladder was made from two poles of good strong timber cut to the desired length. Holes were bored in each at equal distances, the rounds shaved smooth, and the ends nicely fitted to the holes in the poles. Oak or hickory made good ladder rounds. Such a ladder properly constructed of strong wood made a very substantial means of getting upstairs, down cellar, or to the top of a haystack. But there were many ups and downs in those pioneer days which no visible ladder could reach, just as to-day when no polished and carpeted stair with ornamental balustrade can help us surmount our difficulties.

In those times a man would go into the timber with an ax, a saw, a hammer, a jack knife, and possibly a

few other very ordinary tools which a carpenter of later times would consider altogether inadequate. He would build a cabin home and take his bride to live there away from the old home in which perhaps she had been reared in comparative luxury. It might be that this new home was far from neighbors, and where there were no schools or church. But it was their home.

Now I have built my log cabin but have made no provision for a fireplace or a stove. I never had the novel experience of living by a fireplace, for my parents had a stove at the time my memory began. A Premium stove, I think it was called, and I well remember spelling out the name of the maker, "Woodruff", and the place where it was made, Cincinnati, Ohio. A hole for the stove pipe was cut through the upper floor and the roof and large nails were driven in the edges of the boards to prevent the pipe from getting too close to the wood and causing a blaze. It seems strange that this did not often occur, for in cold weather the stove was frequently red hot. Rain and snow came through the hole in the roof and the water ran down the pipe making it red with rust. That was before the days of Rising Sun Stove Polish.

In homes where a fireplace was built it was usually placed in the middle of one end of the room with stone for the back wall, jambs, and hearthstone. Some fireplaces were so large that a log four feet long could

be placed in them. This back log was sometimes eighteen inches thick.

The walls of the fireplace were gradually drawn in to make a throat, then the chimney built up. This "chimbly", as many called it, was commonly built of sticks and thoroughly daubed inside and out with mud. Upon the crane which extended over the fire was hung the kettle or the big black three-legged pot in which dinner was cooked.

In the pioneer home of a newly married couple, much of the furniture was probably handmade. Some pieces, such as a bedstead, a chair or two, maybe a half dozen chairs, a bureau, or a chest, may have been brought with them, a gift from father and mother. Very seldom indeed did a newly married pair possess all of these things at first.

A cupboard of those times frequently consisted of a board set on end the required distance from the corner to allow the length of shelf room desired. Cleats were nailed to this board and to the log wall. On these were placed boards for shelves, and a small strip nailed along the back edge of each shelf made a plate rail. The plates and platters, if the happy housewife possessed a platter, were set on edge against this plate rail and rested against the wall, each plate being slipped a little behind the one before it, their shining cleanness making a rather pleasant decoration. Other dishes were set on the shelf in front of these, the tea

cups and saucers being arranged in a pile, three cups turned on edge in each pile of three saucers. Usually they were placed on the table in the same way until the coffee or tea was poured.

Up to about the height of a table the cupboard was wider than the upper part, so that the shelves were deeper. Pots, pans, and kettles were kept below, while "victuals", such as were not stored in the cellar, were kept on the upper shelf of this lower part of the cupboard. A curtain, usually of calico, was hung to the edge of the top wide shelf, hiding the contents from view.

A table had to be made of whatever materials were available. Perhaps a slab split from a large log, with legs driven into holes bored in the underside, was the best that could be obtained. With boards, either pine, oak, or walnut, an "elegant" cross-legged table could be constructed.

Fortunate young wives might have brought one or two tablecloths from their mother's supply of home-made linen. But these had to be carefully cared for until flax could be raised and prepared for the loom, or more cloth brought from the East. Consequently the dinners are served, for the most part, on the clean polished boards.

All of the family sewing in those times was done by the women, be it a heavy overcoat or the wardrobe of the tiniest babe, a wedding dress or a shroud. Stock-

ings, socks, and mittens were knit at home. For many years there were no looms in the new country for weaving linen or linsey-woolsey, as the cloth with linen warp and wool woof was called. There were no carpet looms. Rugs were sometimes made by braiding three strands of rags, cut or torn rather coarser than for carpet. These long braids were sewed together into a round or oval rug. But most homes had no carpet of any kind, so no one felt "out of fashion" with the bare floor scrubbed clean.

The windows were often uncurtained. After a time, paper shades, or "blinds", were common. These were made of heavy paper, mostly green in color, and decorated with gaudy-colored birds and flowers and trees. They were tacked to a strip of wood at each end, and the top one nailed to the window frame. A string was passed over the top in such a manner that the lower end of the "blind" could be rolled to the desired height and the cord tied to hold it.

For many years no home, however wealthy the owner or whether in country or city, had screens at the doors or windows. Yet flies were few in homes where neatness and order reigned, all eatables being put away as soon as the meal was finished and everything washed up at once.

Once a week at least, windows were washed and all "woodwork" and furniture rubbed or washed clean of every speck and finger mark. The floors were

scrubbed with home-made soft soap and sand until, as I have heard said of many a woman, "Her floors are clean enough to eat off of." I think as a rule houses were really cleaner then than they are now with all of our modern furnishings, carpets, rugs, upholstery, and hangings to catch dust and lint. Then there were few carpets and little furniture except table, cupboard, chairs, and beds. With a pretty thorough weekly house-cleaning, everything was spick and span.

After lime was available, the walls were white-washed every spring and sometimes in the fall also. What a sweet clean smell it gave the room! On a bright morning the bedding, table, chairs, and other furniture were carried out doors. During breakfast, or perhaps the day before, the lime had been slacked. This was done by putting the dark-colored, kiln-burned limestone into an iron pot or some such vessel and pouring water on it. Hot water would start the process quicker than cold but either would soon make the contents bubble and boil. Setting out doors on the ground, with no fire near it, the powdered lime heated and kept boiling until it became a smooth, snowy white mass which could be thinned to the proper consistency to apply to the walls.

The lime having been slacked, the room emptied, and the housewife arrayed in an old dress with a cloth pinned over her hair, everything was ready for the whitewashing. This was often done with an old

broom, especially on log walls, but usually a special whitewash brush was preferred. A woman who had no brush of her own would send the children two or three miles to get one from a neighbor. An expert did not splash the floor and woodwork very badly, but when the whitewashing was done the windows had to be washed, the floor scrubbed, and the furniture carried in again. By night everything was neat and a steaming supper was on the table. Housecleaning began and finished on the same day.

SUSAN I. DUBELL

Mount Hope Church

Fifty years ago a person seeking the location of Mount Hope Church would have been told, "Why, yes, stranger, Mount Hope Methodist Church is in Bennington Township. It's seven miles straight north by east, 'as the crow flies', from the east end of Fourth Street bridge in Waterloo. Most of the farms are fenced, so you can't follow the old trail. Makes it a little farther by road; they call it eight miles."

How much that name, Mount Hope, means to dozens of people scattered the length and breadth of America — lawyers, doctors, merchants, farmers, musicians, writers, public speakers! In the days of their youth it was the spiritual center of the neighborhood. Established by the faith, work, and coöperation of those pioneer fathers, it became the embodiment of the community character and ideals. Mount Hope Church served not only as a place of worship, but as a social and intellectual center as well. The cultural influence of that country meeting-house has had an abiding effect even to the third generation.

That a church would be established in the community was inevitable. The religious nature of most of the early settlers in Bennington Township was assurance of that. Services were held in a schoolhouse

whenever a preacher could be obtained, and Sunday school was maintained regularly. It was not until 1881, however, just a half century ago, that the project of building a church was undertaken. The story of that enterprise is vividly told in the diary of William A. Wilson.

The winter months of 1881, according to the record in Mr. Wilson's diary, seem to have been very cold and the snow fall was unusually heavy. The sleighing was good. Rails came down from the fences and bob-sleds and cutters glided merrily across fields and meadows to Waterloo and elsewhere. In some places the snow drifted so deep that vehicles could pass directly over the fences on the icy surface. But the severe weather seems not to have interfered seriously with social and religious activities.

On January 9, 1881, the thermometer stood at 30° below zero, yet the record in the old diary declared that the "Children went to north school to Sabbath school and meeting". One week later the record was the same — "30° below zero. Children went to north school to Sabbath school and meeting". It is clear that the "north school" was the center of religious and social activity of the community. "February 7, Big banks of snow. Snowed and blowed all night. Scooped snow".

Meanwhile, despite stormy weather, plans for building a church went forward. The ever increasing con-

gregation, inspired by the energy and ambition of the young minister, Rev. DeWitt Clinton, demanded more room. Under the leadership of Mrs. L. D. Rolph the Sabbath school grew apace. Everybody seemed to be enthusiastic.

On March 26th, W. A. Wilson's diary reads, "Mr. W. H. Palmer here to see about building a new M. E. Church. Thawing some. Robbins returning." Spring was in the air. There was work to be done. March 29th: "Went to a meeting at Faulkner's School to see about building church". Apparently the question was decided in the affirmative, for two days later Mr. Wilson "went around with subscription paper for building the new church." The next day, April 1st, "Mr. and Mrs. Palmer spent the day with us", to discuss the business of the church. From a record now old and yellow, in Mr. Palmer's handwriting the success of his "Subscribers' List" is given:

Mr. J. M. Bennet . . .	$30.00	Boise & Couch	$ 5.00
Mrs. C. A. Miller . .	30.00	H. Williams	1.00
M. H. Moore & Co. .	20.00	J. K. Stanley	2.00
Joe King	50.00	Balliet & Weld . . .	2.00
W. Snowden	10.00	W. Hicks	10.00
G. Snowden	5.00	O. F. Miller	5.00
Mrs. Shaulis	1.00	G. W. Thurston . . .	5.00
I. M. Hazel	5.00	Wm. A. Wilson . . .	100.00
B. Stewart	5.00	Wm. H. Palmer . . .	100.00
Mrs. Frank	5.00	Mr. Joe King later pledged $50 more.	

Mr. Wilson spent all day Wednesday, April 6th with W. H. Palmer discussing plans for building the church. Two days later, "A meeting was held at the home of Mr. Gookins," for the purpose of organizing the business administration of the new church. Rev. Clinton was in the neighborhood in the interests of the church. Because of their larger contributions, Mr. Palmer, Mr. Wilson, and Mr. King were named the first trustees and building committee. The diary record reads: "Church incorporating. Now ready for business." The signers of the articles of incorporation, besides the trustees, were D. S. Gookins, Jacob Ennis, Joseph Thompson, Charles McGinley, W. H. Graham, Charles Gibbs, N. B. Choate, John Farman, John Briden, and W. W. Hunter.

Soon afterward Joseph Schenk "donated a small corner of ground for the church". Then on Tuesday, May 31st, "Men commenced blasting stone on my farm for the church on the corner". B. A. Wilson hauled the first load of stone to the spot where community interest centered as building operations began. "Grandpa Funk built the foundation." The carpenters in charge were Mr. Bretnell and his son who had just come from England a short time before. They donated a share of their labor, for as soon as the framework was up they were given the privilege of living in the church and boarding themselves. All this time they were assisted by those interested who could "lend

a hand" to aid in any way. Chris Schenk did the plastering. George Ellis built the chimney, the brick having been burned in a kiln at Blakesville. Only once in the fifty years since it was built has that chimney been repaired.

By autumn the church was finished. On November 8, 1881, "Adelbert [B. A. Wilson] and Charles Choate went to town to buy oysters for a festival in the new church". That evening the young people went to the "oyster supper at the church". And thus was established the new church as a social center. On November 23rd, in spite of a "cold north wind", the edifice was given a good cleaning. Windows were washed and everything made ready for the dedication. Mr. Wilson's day book says, "Cold north wind. Girls helped clean new church". There was much hurrying about on the part of the ladies. No doubt the statement on December 1st that "Mary and Adelbert went to town. Mary bought new dolmans" is an indication of what others were doing. Two days later in the evening of December 3rd a meeting was held at the church and final preparations made for the services on the morrow.

Up to this time open weather had prevailed. Indian summer had made a beautiful day for the last Sabbath school and meeting day at the old north schoolhouse on November 27th, which had been the home of this congregation for nearly ten years. Sun-

day, December 4th, was a pleasant day. Mr. Wilson's diary says, "Went to church in new church. It was dedicated. House was full. Tonight all gone to church but me and Elsie and the baby [Perle]. *Long may it* [the church] *stand and be a blessing to the community is My desire.*" December 11th: "Children gone to Sabbath school in new church."

Was it the end of labor, the completion of the building? No. On December 19th, Mr. Wilson "set posts and hitching frames at church". Also on this day, "J. P. King, Waterloo photographer, took the first picture of the church." The name, Mount Hope Church, was suggested by Mr. Wilson in memory of a small mountain "back in the Yadkin Valley" in North Carolina. Moreover, Mr. and Mrs. N. B. Choate had come from Port Hope, Canada. Since the church was a veritable "mountain of hope" to the neighborhood, the name had a symbolical implication that appealed to all.

The dedication of Mount Hope Church was a memorable occasion, not the least significant feature being the unusual circumstance of freedom from indebtedness. Events of that day are still cherished recollections and each family has its own stories. An incident which must have amused those in attendance and mortified one of the first trustees occurred toward the end of the morning service. A little four-and-a-half-year-old girl had been promised that she should

go to the church in the afternoon. When the meeting extended long past the customary closing time, she became weary of waiting. Taking things into her own hands, she slipped away from her hired caretaker, "Tammer", secured her best shoes, wrapped herself in a heavy shawl which hid her calico dress, for her good clothes hung too high on hooks above her head, and thus arrayed Asenath trudged to her haven, the new church.

Of the actual dedication service the record is quite matter of fact. Rev. J. W. Clinton assisted his son, the pastor, Rev. DeWitt Clinton. Miss Belle Clinton, sister of the pastor, was the organist, playing without a hymn book, for this important article had been overlooked. Two organs for the occasion had been loaned by Waterloo music dealers. Miss Emma I. Wilson became the first official organist.

On January 13, 1882, a "New England Supper", was held to raise money for the "organ fund and other necessary things", including "new overshoes and a new overcoat for the young minister". A penciled record shows that on one occasion "Mr. Clinton walked from the Gibbs farm where he boarded to the church through bitter cold and across the fields on the snowbanks over the fence tops". His need of warm clothing must have been quite as imperative as a church organ. The supper itself seems to have been fully as successful in a culinary and social way as it was

financially. The bill-of-fare was chicken pie, baked beans, and brown bread, a typical Boston Saturday-night supper.

Some of the costumes worn at this gala affair may well be mentioned. A chronicler says, "Isaac Whitney with powdered wig, and Mary Wilson as George and Martha Washington, were a decided success. W. H. Palmer wore a suit he had brought with him from England. Knee britches, long stockings, slipper with silver buckles, a ruffled shirt and a waistcoat, with a three cornered hat. Miss Lottie Choate wore a dress of twenty years or more before which belonged to her mother, Mrs. N. B. Choate. Miss Edith Betts came as a sweet and charming bride." W. A. Wilson wore his wedding suit with its brocaded satin vest and Mrs. Wilson, her white silk, hand-knotted fringed, wedding shawl, bought in Dubuque in 1857 when Mr. Wilson was a pioneer merchant at Algona.

Weeks went by and then the first sorrow came to the little white church. It was the funeral of William Lawrence Wilson on May 9, 1882. Burial was in Fairview Cemetery, a place where those who know can read on many a tombstone names of Mount Hope's honored dead. Only four funerals have been held in this church, and no wedding has ever been celebrated there.

As the years have slipped away the little church has become a community shrine. There the devotion,

the joy, the sorrow, and the pleasures of the neighborhood have centered. Ministers have come and gone, and each has left the imprint of his character upon the congregation. Yet perhaps none has been more faithful or influential than the first beloved pastor.

In this fiftieth anniversary the setting sun may still fall upon a silver lamp reflector, as a stray ray of light filters through the unshuttered windows. The old walnut cottage organ, the communion rail, and the great horsehair-covered chairs on the rostrum are gone, but the old Bible is still there on the folding table. The old air-tight wood stoves for which W. A. Wilson used to "carry an armful of wood to start the fire so it would get warmed up quick" have been replaced by a furnace in the basement. Are the walls still hung with rare tapestries — the ropes of white and red clover and evergreens, wreaths of roses, crosses of lilies, and bouquets of lavender and white lilacs and iris that festooned the walls on Children's Day? Tapestries of memory. Perhaps they can be seen by following the *Shining Road* that leads from home to the ever open door of old Mount Hope Church.

G. Perle Schmidt

Comment by the Editor

WHAT'S IN AN INDEX

Consider the *Congressional Record*. Such a labyrinth of arguments and motions, points of order, leaves to print, private bills, petitions signed by one and sundry others, special orders, morning hours, the Union calendar, yeas and nays, extensions of remarks, unanimous consent, committee meetings, and amendments to amendments could never be explored successfully without a guide to names and public problems. To find a thought within ten thousand pages full of six-point type would be a task to test the perseverance of Ulysses, unless the Congressmen's ideas were catalogued. All things may well be counted lost which, being locked in multitudinous confusion, possess no key to turn the bolt of orderly arrangement. Certainly no volume is so brief or simple that it can not be improved by a program of its contents.

Perhaps the work of Congress may be typical. What phase of human achievement does not need a guide to indicate its meaning and design? Without an index, even commonplace activities would be difficult indeed. The tourist watches for the highway numbers; the mariner scans his compass; the pilot reads the surface of the water; and the woodsman finds his way by the position of the sun or the mossy sides of trees.

All are indices of place. The weather-vane points at the wind; longitude and latitude constitute the exact index to everywhere; a calendar is merely a table of days arranged in weeks and months and years by which we measure time; the gnomon of a sundial marks the fleeting span of daylight.

But indexes are not confined to books and means of telling time or finding places. Habits, opinions, appearance, and associates are useful guides to human character. He who played backgammon in Arabia could not testify in court. A man is known by the company he keeps. The palmist tries to reconstruct a stranger's life from the evidence that his hand reveals, while John Hancock's signature has become the symbol of a bold and enterprising man. A person's countenance is an open index to his mind, reflecting there in smiling lips or flashing eyes his inmost thoughts and feelings. According to the legend, Ernest assimilated character from gazing at the Great Stone Face.

The world, it seems, is fully indexed. What has been done, if viewed in orderly perspective, explains the present state of being and points the way to future conduct. Selection and arrangement of significant events makes history an instrument of cosmos. In such a sense the PALIMPSEST itself is something of an index to the history of Iowa — always incomplete perhaps, yet serving as a partial guide to past events, historic spots, and not-forgotten people.

J. E. B.

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THE STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA

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